

NEWS RELEASE



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Plan for Anza-Borrego Desert State Park Goes to State Park Commission for Vote

Balanced Plan Highlights Recreation and Resource Protection

San Diego – After seven years of extensive study and eight public hearings, the staff of California State Parks is recommending that the California State Parks and Recreation Commission approve the Anza-Borrego Desert State Park Preliminary General Plan and Draft Environmental Impact Statement at its February 11th meeting in San Diego.

“No other General Plan that I know of,” said State Parks Director Ruth Coleman, “has undergone such an exhaustive and thorough public input and review process. A wide variety of groups and individuals helped create a plan which is well balanced because it provides for protection for fragile resources while maintaining extensive recreational opportunities.”

The State Parks Commission meeting, Friday, February 11, 2005, at 9:00 a.m., will be held at the San Diego Marriott Mission Valley, 8757 Rio San Diego Drive in San Diego. The meeting facility is wheelchair accessible. Anza-Borrego Desert State Park is among the largest state parks in the nation at more than 600,000 acres and is located 50 miles east of San Diego.

Key proposals found in this General Plan are:

- ☐ **Maintains the policy of open camping, an opportunity that is very rare in today's State and National parks, and it allows expansion of recreational support facilities.**
- ☐ **Recognizes the importance of maintaining vehicle routes throughout the park as the primary means of visitor access. There are over 420 miles of designated routes of travel which are primitive roads and almost 100 miles of paved access roadways.**
- ☐ **Establishes a park mission, goals and guidelines to reflect modern park issues and a strong philosophy of park stewardship, assuring that primary resources are protected for current and future generations to enjoy.**

- **Designates approximately 4,500 acres as Focused Use Zones that allow for potential expansion of visitor support facilities, such as additional campgrounds, picnic areas, a visitor information center, established trailheads, parking and interpretive panels.**
- **Creation of a 443-acre Cultural Preserve, to recognize the important values of Native American sites, and the location of a Butterfield Overland Stage Station site. The plan also calls for completion of a Cultural Resource Management Plan, which will likely result in additional preserves.**
- **Creation of 55,797 acres of additional and new State Wilderness. Much of this acreage reflects land acquisitions made to the park since the late 1970's, in the form of "in holdings" and private land donated or purchased from willing sellers.**
- **Re-affirms the permanent vehicle closure of a 3.1-mile portion of Coyote Canyon, along Coyote Creek, to protect one of the park's most fragile stream corridors. The full length of the canyon remains open to hikers, mountain bikers and equestrians eight months out of the year.**

Important to note is that this General Plan does not dictate the removal of any roads that exist within the park today. In addition, the 420 miles of dirt roads in Anza-Borrego is five times denser than the road system in similar units of the National Park System. There are approximately 100 miles of trails in the park, including 50 miles of the Pacific Crest Trail and 36 miles of the California Riding and Hiking Trail.

Like Death Valley National Park, Anza-Borrego it is an International Biosphere Site because of its world-wide recognition for its significant and unique environmental and geological features. The park has also been recognized by the U.S. Department of Interior as a National Natural Landmark, and it is home to both the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail and the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail. The park is known as a world-class visitor destination with an extensive system of more than 200 campsites. The camping ranges from primitive to full-convenience and from backpacking in the Wilderness to tent and car camping in the backcountry or motor home camping in developed campgrounds.

Extensive Public Input Process

The plan was first proposed for a vote in 2003 after an extensive public input and review process. A Commission hearing at that time was postponed due to a lack of a Commission quorum. Following that, a second hearing was postponed to give the new Administration time to become familiar with the issues. Next, a decision was made to revise the format of the California Environmental Quality Act portions and to include significant new land acquisitions. The revised plan, now being presented to the State Parks and Recreation Commission, was then re-circulated for a second round of public input.

In total, this plan has undergone a series of eight public hearings in four communities surrounding the park, including San Diego, Orange County, Riverside, and Borrego Springs. Two rounds of focus group meetings were held with off-highway enthusiasts, equestrians, hang gliders, conservation groups, rangers and staff. Also, prior to the final public hearing, the planning team met with the Off-Highway Vehicle Division (OHV) and OHV community representatives to make sure all designated roads and trails were shown on the base map. The review process has spanned a period of five years, with hundreds of interested citizens attending meetings and providing comment.

In addition, significant information about the park was collected before the General Plan process began. This information, which contributed greatly to the decision-making data included in the General Plan, came from an inventory of park resources completed in 1998 and a Visitor Use Study completed by the University of Montana in 2001.

Coyote Canyon

One of the main points of controversy concerns the continued closure of the 3.1 miles of roadway through Coyote Canyon, between Middle and Upper Willows. The closure occurred in 1995 when the Coyote Canyon Public Use Plan was adopted after extensive public input and review. Many years of monitoring clearly documented that vehicle use through the streambed was degrading both wildlife and plants and infringing on the watering access for the federally endangered Peninsula Bighorn Sheep, and also the critical habitat for the state and federally endangered Least Bell's Vireo. The entire canyon is federally recognized as "Critical Habitat" for the Peninsula Bighorn Sheep.

Coyote Canyon contains one of the most significant year-round streams in this desert environment. While only 3.1 miles of the canyon is closed to vehicles, the entire canyon remains open to hikers, mountain bikers, and equestrians eight months of the year. It is closed during four summer months because human disturbance of any kind keeps the sheep away from water sources critical to their survival during the hottest months of the year. Off-highway vehicle groups have sought an alternate route through Coyote Canyon; however, independent studies have concluded that there are no viable alternate routes because of both existing State wilderness lands as well as numerous state and federal environmental laws.

General Plan and Future Management Plans

The purpose of a General Plan is to provide guidelines for future land use management within a park. They are considered broad documents intended to guide park development and management for many decades. The "Preliminary" General Plan will become "Final" if approved by the Commission.

A number of more detailed Management Plans will follow the General Plan. For instance, other plans to be developed will focus on camping, roads, trails, natural resources, cultural resources, fire, education and park interpretation.

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